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COMMUNITY NEWS

EPA urged to buy Superfund house

By Cynthia J. McGroarty
Special to The Inquirer

The owner of a radiation-contaminated duplex in Lansdowne scheduled for a cleanup under the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program said a foreclosure on the property was imminent if the EPA did not take some action to prevent it.

William Walls said he received a letter from his mortgage lender two weeks ago saying he had 30 days to pay the mortgage or lose the house, at 133 Austin Ave. Walls has not made mortgage payments since June, when the four tenants who occupied the house were moved out by the EPA. The tenants were evacuated after tests showed levels of radiation harmful to pregnant women and children. A pregnant woman and a young child were among those evacuated.

Without rental income, Walls has not been able to make the monthly payments.

The Lansdowne duplex has been evacuated. Now foreclosure appears imminent.

"I know it's an unusual situation, but that doesn't mean I should lose the property," Walls said.

He said he wrote two letters to the EPA about the matter, but not until he hired a lawyer, who wrote a third letter, did the agency respond.

"I have not received one letterhead from them," Walls said. "They have never contacted me other than to ask permission to go onto the property" in June.

"That's inconsiderate," he said. EPA spokeswoman Leanne Nurse said agency attorneys were handling the matter and had contacted Walls' attorney.

"It falls back on the lawyers. I can't talk about it any further than that," Nurse said.

Peter DeLiberty, Walls' attorney, said the law governing the rights of those who own Superfund sites was unsatisfactory.

"We do have some problems with the way the federal law is written. It does not appear to provide redress for the homeowner," DeLiberty said.

He said Walls may have to file a lawsuit to change the law.

DeLiberty said he would like to meet with the EPA and the mortgage lender to discuss the property. "I'm not sure the lender would want to foreclose on a property it can't sell," he said.

Walls, who did not know about the radiation when he bought the house four years ago as an investment, said he wanted the EPA to purchase the property, which he estimated to be worth \$35,000, or reimburse him for lost rental income. But Nurse said it was not the agency's policy to buy Superfund properties.

EPA investigators found above-normal radiation levels at the duplex in June after the state Department of Environmental Resources informed them about possible radium and radon contamination. In September, preliminary radiologic tests found contamination 15 to 20 times what the EPA considers safe. Those levels, in addition to high levels found at an adjacent vacant warehouse, persuaded the agency to list the properties under the Superfund program.

The contamination is thought to have originated at the warehouse, where radium was processed in the early part of the century. The warehouse is scheduled for dismantling before the end of the year. Officials do not know whether it will be necessary to dismantle the duplex.

Contractors last week began scanning the area within a one-mile radius of the properties to find where the waste ore from the radium processing may have been dumped. Nurse said it was not known whether the ore was discarded within that area.

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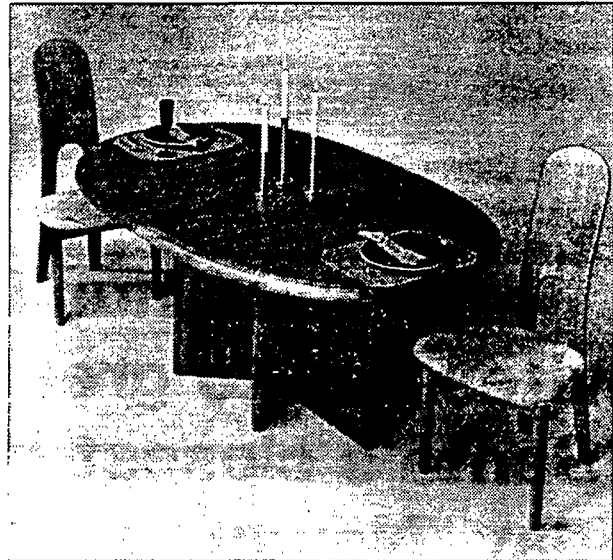
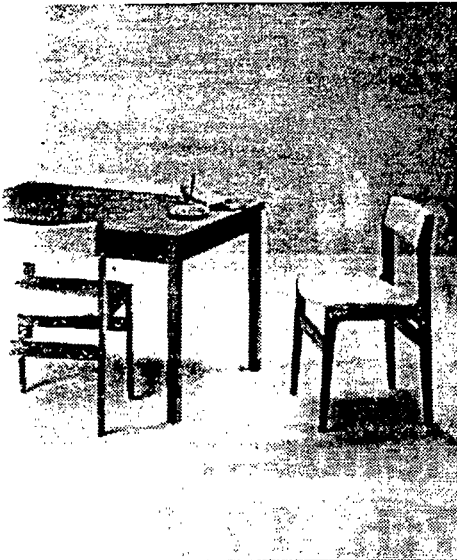


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